

THE SAMOAN CIRCLE: A SMALL GROUP PROCESS FOR  
DISCUSSING CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS

by Lorenz Aggens

Public officials or agency staff often need to hear from concerned publics about their problems, needs, fears and values before a decision is made on an issue of controversy in the community. People with opposing views will often fill a large meeting room, their mood charged with emotion. Many people in the room may hope to influence the decision by their cheers, or booing. Because each person is likely to get only one chance to speak, statements may have been written out for reading, or some especially articulate person will have been chosen to speak for a group of citizens. That responsibility, and the size and temperament of the audience, promotes oration by speakers and the use of words more designed to stir emotions than to share personal opinions and feelings about the subject at issue.

The person responsible for conducting such a meeting usually feels great personal stress over the need to "control" the meeting and insure that the discussion is equitable and moderate. In attempting to be "in charge" while being fair and neutral, the person presiding over the meeting will often use tactics that will be seen as capricious or arbitrary by those vying for special recognition and influence. If the Chairman of the meeting is from the staff or policy board that will be making a decision on the issue under discussion, he or she is likely to become the target for stern admonitions, emotional appeals, and even threats. The people running, or the panel of decision makers sitting in the front of the room "hearing" from their publics, often feel that THEY have become the subject of the meeting. Instead of being able to listen carefully to what is being said, the chairman or meeting sponsors find themselves in the position of having to answer (or decline to answer) rhetorical questions and challenges.

It was after just such a meeting that the idea of the Samoan Circle was born. The staff of the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission (the regional planning agency for the Chicago metropolitan area) were "debriefing"--otherwise known as licking your wounds--after a particularly abusive "meeting" between war parties in a land use dispute. Our discussions quickly turned to whether there was a better way to hear from both sides of an argument without being accused of being the "other side" by both sides.

One of the staff reported that, in some Pacific island communities he had read about (and Samoa might not be one of them), issues were debated, in years gone by, by calling together all interested parties to share their views in an open and equitable discussion format. After several days of feasting and drinking together, those who still felt there was an issue gathered in a circle to discuss the matter. No one was in charge of the meeting. Anyone spoke out who was stirred by the discussion. The more interested participants moved closer to the center of the discussion circle. The less interested remained on the fringe of the circle, or drifted away. The discussion went on and on until those most concerned in the outcome of the matter could arrive at some agreement. Then they all had a final drink together and went home.

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This is an original article describing material used by the author in IWR training programs.

## *Public Involvement and Dispute Resolution*

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With little to lose, the staff agreed that something like this should be tried, although we agreed that--despite their similarities to extracurricular activities at national political conventions--some features of the meeting process would have to be omitted.

Something like the process described in the accompanying article was tried, first on a group of about 30 people, and then with larger groups. At one of these meetings, someone asked for the name of the meeting process. The meeting facilitator, in a momentary flash of alliteration said, "Call it the Samoan Circle!" Efforts to retract that christening have failed. Most people who have used the Samoan Circle process more than once have called it something like a "discussion circle", or omitted any title, as a means of saving a lot of time explaining something that may be anthropological baloney. [Although the process may not have its origins in Samoa, it has now been used there. However, a report by a government agency staff member notes that after the elders gather to discuss proposals by his agency, a drink is passed around among participants, the effect of which is to paralyze the vocal cords of all "off-islanders."]

A description of the Samoan Circle, in the state to which it has currently evolved, is provided below--dedicated to all who have found themselves the "target" rather than the leader of the meeting.

### THE SAMOAN CIRCLE

The "Samoan Circle" meeting process is designed to facilitate the discussion of controversial issues when there is a large group of people interested in the topic. Its principal value is in the opportunity it affords for an exploration and exchange of knowledge and opinion where the large size of the group, or an environment of controversy, might disable other kinds of meetings. This meeting process is also useful when the possibility exists that no one person could be accepted as a fair moderator by all who might seek to be involved in the discussion.

In a "Samoan Circle" meeting, individuals can speak out on the issue without the need for oratorical skills, or the ability to put all their thoughts together into the one, short, cogent statement so often required by the dynamics of involvement in large group meetings. In this process, no one needs to be burdened with the responsibility of being the moderator of equitable participation, a judge of fairness, or the controller of other people's behavior. The advantages of small group discussion are afforded in the midst of a large group. The need and the opportunity for participants to use dramatics, "us/them" name-calling, and "cheerleading" in efforts to make their points are lessened.

The process does not resolve conflict. It is intended for the fullest possible exchange of information about an issue in anticipation of other group processes better designed for decision making or conflict management. However, some users of the "Samoan Circle" have experienced the spontaneous resolution of conflicting views and agreement on actions required--apparently as a result of the contestants in a controversy having heard one another for the first time. It is not recommended that users of this process anticipate this result.

Other types of meetings should be used when the organization that has called the meeting wants to present information to those in attendance, or when the sponsoring organization is likely to be required to answer a lot

of questions or defend itself or its propositions to all others present at the meeting. The "Samoa Circle" has been used successfully in meetings with as many as 400 persons in attendance, and as few as a dozen. The meeting process works best when there is controversy. It does not fail in the absence of controversy, but the mechanics will seem less needed and may become an irritant when other, more traditional, meeting processes would work just as well.

A prerequisite for using the "Samoa Circle" is faith in democratic methods and their valuing of opposing and minority points of view. It requires belief that any group's decisions will benefit from the collision of truth and error, and that strongly held and represented opinions are as valuable to the decision-making process as are open and analytical minds. This kind of meeting also requires participants who are of goodwill in spite of disagreement. Any group process can be destroyed by persons bent upon disruption as a means of achieving their objectives.

The most notable characteristic of the "Samoa Circle" is that there is no one who is the chairman, or moderator, or facilitator. It is a leaderless meeting. Responsibility for discipline in this kind of meeting is vested in everyone, rather than in meeting leaders. Everyone has, and will quickly see that he or she has, a clear stake and part in maintaining an orderly environment for discussion.

Room Arrangements: As many chairs as seem needed for the meeting should be set up on concentric circles, with the inner circle big enough in diameter to allow for a round table with five chairs.<sup>1</sup> There should be enough space around the central table and five chairs for people to walk around it without having to climb over the legs of those sitting in the first circle of seats. Four or more aisles should be left open to permit people to move easily from seats in the concentric circles to seats at the center table. For large groups, a microphone should be placed on the center table to insure that discussion across this table can be heard easily by everyone in the room--but it is destructive to the group dynamic intended if this microphone is handed around the table as each person takes a turn talking. People at the center table should be talking to one another, personally, at close range. They should not be coming to the center table only to gain access to the microphone in order to whip up enthusiasm among allies in the audience. An omnidirectional microphone (taped down, if necessary) in the center of the table should be used--but only when this is absolutely necessary because of the size of the group.

Starting the Meeting: After the group has been called to order by the person who will begin and end the meeting, it should be stated that the purpose of the meeting is to learn from one another as much as is possible about the topic that is at issue in the community--including facts, problems, obstacles, needs, values, solution ingredients, suggestions for improvement and new ideas. Representatives of the two or three sides that may be contesting over the issue could share in this introduction in an effort to strengthen the realization

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<sup>1</sup>The 60" round table commonly used in hotel banquets is ideal. Five chairs provide space for what many researchers feel is the optimum size group for discussions.

that the meeting process is not a contrivance or manipulation of one side by the other. Here is a sample of the words used on one occasion to launch this kind of meeting:

(After statement of purpose). . . "We hope that we can learn from one another by sharing our views--freely, openly and candidly. To make this possible in a short period of time, we would like to use a meeting process that overcomes a number of the problems you may have experienced in having a productive and orderly discussion in a large group. This meeting process may be new to you, but it is easy to understand. It is designed to run on the energy of your knowledge and opinions. It will be guided by your interests, and moderated or disciplined by your commitment to democratic principles. The success of this meeting will not depend upon the parliamentary skills or leadership of a chairman or moderator--it will depend upon your willingness to participate, to share, and to use differences of opinion as stepping stones to new ideas and solutions, rather than as stumbling blocks to progress. All meetings have rules. Here are the rules for this one:

1. Anyone may participate by making a statement, asking a question, answering a question, taking exception to or confirming another person's opinion, making a rebuttal, and so on. But to do any of these things, the person who wants to say something must come to this center table and take a seat. Once there, he or she may interrupt, or wait for an opening in any discussion that is going on. The person taking a seat can join in the discussion or try to change its direction, or raise a new topic.
2. The discussion at any one time is limited to the five people who can be seated at this table. If you come to the table, you may stay as long as you feel you have a contribution to make to the discussion. You may leave and return again as often as you wish. If there are no vacant seats at the table and you want to get in on the discussion, stand near the table until someone gives up a seat. The more people there are standing near the table waiting for seats, the more this should signal those sitting in the discussion to evaluate their own need to continue to participate. If you want to talk to one of the people at the table, stand directly behind that person's chair as a signal to the others at the table that you want one of their seats.
3. If you want to cheer, or groan, or make any other noises to represent your opinion, please come to the table, take a seat here, and then do it. Once I leave this table, I will be bound by these same rules. The discussion will go on until there is no one left at the table, or until the time for adjournment arrives.

If there are no questions, we can begin the discussion."

It is helpful, after the instructions are given, to have one or two people who have previously agreed to "break the ice" come to the center table and begin the discussion. The first person at the table, or anyone who is left alone at the table, is in fact talking to everyone in the room, and this may be a bit awkward for some people.

Once a second person comes to the table, the discussion becomes a more personal conversation, and the theater-in-the-round condition disappears.

People from the organization that called the meeting should not assume any privilege in communications that is not afforded to other participants. If a question is asked that the organization should answer, a representative of the organization should move to the table and respond from there. When the answer has been delivered, the representative should move back to the audience seats. If the meeting needs some redirection or the process needs clarification, the person "in charge"--the one who made the opening comments--should seek a seat at the table to make this statement.

Meeting Dynamics: Once there are two or more people involved in the discussion, the talk takes on the "you-and-I" character of communication at short range. The oratory and belligerence that are common when "discussion" is taking place across the width of a 30-foot room lessens when people of different persuasions close the physical distance between them. Discussion across the round table is usually (but not always) more relaxed, temperate, conversant and instructive. If people feel the need to assault one another over their convictions, oceans of space will not prevent this.

When all the seats at the table are filled and a person comes to the center to wait for a vacancy to develop, it is not uncommon for everyone at the table to stand up and leave. The sense of self-discipline invoked by this unchaired meeting process is very strong in most groups. On the other hand, when no one comes to the center table to wait for a vacancy, those sitting at the table feel free to expand their discussion and register their opinions and feelings several times. Sponsors of this meeting process usually have to suppress the inclination to rush into such situations and shut off a talkative person, or suggest, in the name of equity, that others might want to be heard. If and when such actions are needed, plenty of time should be given for the group to make its own interruption of a monologue, or to show its need for more participant involvement by individual actions to accomplish this. Any guidance needed from meeting sponsors should be given by someone who takes a seat at the table to express that need as a personal opinion.

Meeting Records and Evaluations: A number of things can be added to the meeting process to make a record of transactions and to achieve some degree of "closure" that points at further action. Comments can be transcribed and the process used as a form of public hearing. (However, this meeting format seems inappropriate when formal, written statements are being read into the record.) Minutes can be kept. Decision makers can be identified as auditors scattered throughout the audience. Comments can be written on newsprint on a wall. This can be done as a sequential list of opinions stated, or as a series of categorized lists--such as: "advantages" and "disadvantages;" or "strengths of the proposal" and "suggestions for improvement in the proposal."

At the end of the meeting, time might be left for everyone in attendance to scan the newsprint listing of comments and to leave behind some kind of ballot that would give the sponsoring organization some indication of how people felt who did not participate in the discussion. Those present might be asked to turn in sheets of paper or file cards on which they indicated the points they "strongly agreed" with and those they "strongly disagreed" with. They might pick the five or ten items that they felt were the most important statements of the problem, need, objective, or other answer to the question that had been discussed--and even rank these in order of importance.

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Ending the Meeting: Discussion can be allowed to run its course if there is no time required for adjournment. The meeting room will gradually empty until there may be no more people left except for an intensely interested group at the center table. If time limits, or the need to move on to another agenda topic require the ending of the discussion before everyone has left the center table, a number of things can be done. Someone who is responsible for the time limits can take a seat at the table and call attention to the disappearing time and remind the group of the agreed-upon time for ending the meeting. This often causes a flurry of activity by people who have been holding back, but who are still intent upon getting their point of view heard. An announcement of the need to close the discussion should be made early enough to accommodate this last-minute rush.

When the time to end the meeting is about five to ten minutes away, the person who started the meeting can move to the table, wait for a seat to be vacated if none is already empty, and withdraw that chair. Continuing to stand near the table, the "meeting-ender" can withdraw each chair as it is vacated. This action is frequently acknowledged by the audience with understanding chuckles and, sometimes, by a last-minute rush. The message: "I need to end this meeting," is clear and nonthreatening; but the person ending the meeting should avoid cutting off last-minute participants from at least some chance at expression unless this is absolutely necessary and the need is obvious to all concerned. If any concluding comments are needed, these can be made when the person ending the meeting takes possession of the last chair.

The "Samoan Circle" has been used successfully by a variety of public agencies and private organizations. Satisfaction with the meeting process seems to be related to a recognition by meeting sponsors and participants that it provided an environment for discussion of a controversial subject where other, more conventional, meeting processes had failed them in the past. In using this process, sponsors have modified it to fit peculiar circumstances, or to make it "feel" better to the personalities involved. Reports of these organizations on their use of the "Samoan Circle" have contributed to a better understanding of the process and to its description for others' use. Reports on your use of this meeting technique would be greatly appreciated.

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Reports should be sent to L. Aggens, 1915 Highland Avenue, Wilmette, IL 60091.

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